

YURTS IN BE SI CHUNG,
A PASTORAL COMMUNITY IN A MDO:
FORM, CONSTRUCTION, TYPES, AND RITUALS

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on yurts in Be si chung Village, in Henan Mongol Autonomous County (Rma lho [Huangnan] Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon [Qinghai] Province, China). Background is given on the focal community, yurt typology and construction are examined, and rituals traditionally held in the yurt of the Henan Chin wang 'prince' are discussed. Two maps and twenty-nine images are also provided.

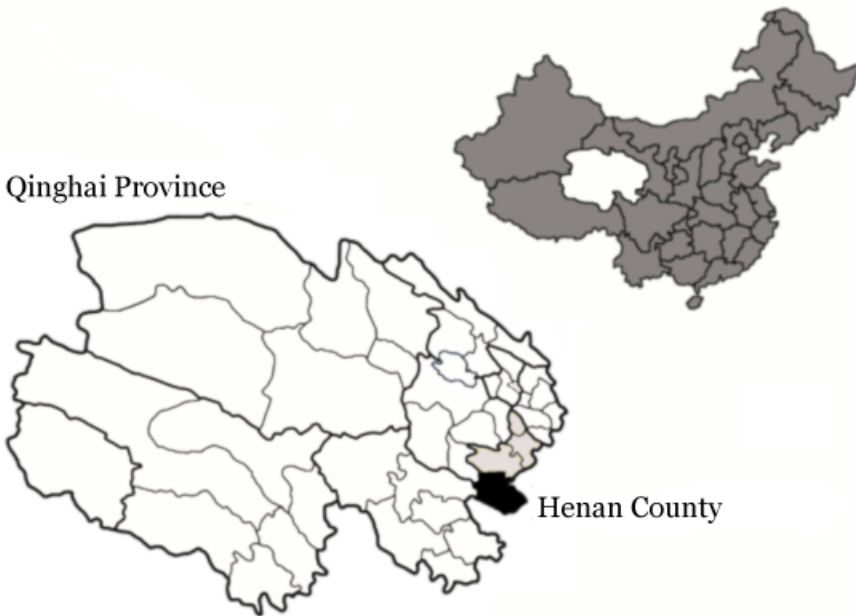
KEYWORDS

A mdo, Henan, Oirat, pastoralism, yurt

INTRODUCTION

Tshe dbang bstan 'dzin (1670-1735) was the first Chin wang 'Prince' of Henan, a pastoral territory on the upper reaches of the Yellow River, centered on what is today's Henan (Rma lho, Sog po) Mongol Autonomous County, in Rma lho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province, China.

Map 1. Henan County.¹



He was a descendant of Gushri Khan, the Oirat (western Mongol)² leader who, at the behest of the fifth Dalai Lama's regent, established

¹ Based on a map available at [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Location_of_Henan_within_Qinghai_\(China\).png](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Location_of_Henan_within_Qinghai_(China).png), accessed 29 August 2013.

² The term Oirat refers to a Mongol ethnolinguistic subgroup, distinct from the Khalkha 'Eastern Mongols' (Halkovic 1985, Pegg 2001). In Tibetan contexts, Oirats and their descendants are typically referred to as Sog, and Khalkha and their descendants as Hor. The linguistic, cultural, and historical differences between Oirats and Khalkha are such that Miyawaki (1990) reports Khalkha referring to Oirats as *quri* 'aliens'.

Oirat hegemony across the northern Tibetan Plateau in the mid-seventeenth century. The history of this period has been dealt with elsewhere (Ahmad 1970, Perdue 2005, Uyungbilig Borjigidai 2002) as has the history of Henan (Diemberger 2007, Dkon mchog skyabs 2009, Gangs ljongs tshan rtsal rig gnas 'phel rgyas gling 2009, Kesang Dargay 2007, Lama Jabb 2009, Lce nag tshang hum chen 2007, Nietupski 2011, Rock 1956, Shinjilt 2007, Yangdon Dondhup 2002, Yeh 2003). For present purposes, it is important to note that the enfeoffment of Tshe dbang bstan 'dzin introduced elements of Oirat cultural influence to the grasslands of Henan, including the use of yurts.

This paper examines contemporary yurts in Henan, focusing on Be si chung Administrative Village, one of the few communities in Henan where a variety of the Oirat language was still spoken in 2013. We were unable to find any detailed literature on yurts in Henan. Yue (2009) briefly mentions yurts in Haixi Mongol and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, and Dkon mchog skyabs (2009) provides the Oirat names for different parts of the yurt. Ekvall (1983:65) is one of few Western writers to mention the yurts of Henan:

The yurt is a much better bad-weather shelter than the black tent, but its cost and weight versus shelter area provided, and the longer time required for setting it up and taking it down, are unfavorable factors.

After providing background on Be si chung Village and its inhabitants, we provide details about yurts, including different types, New Year festivities in the Henan Prince's yurt, and yurt construction. We conclude with comments on the contemporary situation of yurts in Be si chung and in Henan more generally.

RESEARCH METHODS

In undertaking this research during 2012 and 2013, Lha mo sgrol ma, a native of Be si chung Village, interviewed ten people from different

villages in Khu sin Township, including two females and eight males aged between thirty-five and eighty-five. Most people were interviewed only once, while one consultant, Bso go, was interviewed three times. All interviews were conducted in A mdo Tibetan. Questions were written in Tibetan before each interview, and notes were taken in Tibetan during the interview. Follow-up phone calls were made to clarify information. Lha mo sgröl ma also visited the home of her relative, Bsam grub, in Khu sin Township to take photographs as he and his family members prepared yurt materials and pitched a yurt.³

The consultants and the information they provided are summarized below:

- Bso go (b. 1928) was the niece of Bstan 'dzin bkra shis, one of the Henan Prince's *me rin* 'ministers' (see below). She provided information about the Prince's New Year celebrations and various types of yurts.
- Brtson 'grus (b. 1934), an expert yurt maker from Tshos wan sos Village, explained that the Eight Auspicious Symbols⁴ are found on yurts, and also provided information about the Henan Prince.
- Ga rdo (b. 1942), a retiree from Tshos wan sos Village, was once the village's leader. He introduced the history of the Henan Prince and his ministers.
- Bsod nams tshe ring (b. 1970), from Rgya mkhar Village, is considered one of the most knowledgeable people in Henan regarding local history and culture and is much respected by locals. He was Khu sin Primary School headmaster beginning in 1993 and held this position for thirteen years. He was then the

³ Roche contributed to the article by assisting Lha mo sgröl ma with planning the research and structure of the paper, by eliciting detail and clarifying information, language editing, framing the materials with reference to Western literature, and writing certain sections.

⁴ The Eight Auspicious Symbols are common Tibetan decorative motifs used in both sacred and secular contexts. They consist of the lotus flower, victory banner, gold fish, conch shell, parasol, endless knot, vase, and dharma wheel.

leader of Khu sin Township for five years. He has now retired, due to poor health. He provided information about local education.

- Tshe ring don 'grub (b. 1960), Lha mo sgrol ma's father, learned yurt-making from Brtson 'grus. He provided yurt riddles, information on yurt materials, and described the making and pitching of yurts.
- 'Jigs med rdo rje (b. 1985), Lha mo sgrol ma's brother, provided diagrams.
- Rdo rje skyid (b. 1962), Lha mo sgrol ma's mother, provided examples of Oirat language from Be si chung.
- Grags pa rgya mtsho (b. 1979), from Yos rgan nyin Town, is a monk in La kha Monastery. He researches local customs and provided song lyrics sung during the Henan Prince's New Year rituals.

BE SI CHUNG VILLAGE

We focus on Be si chung Administrative Village, Khu sin Township, which is approximately seventy-two kilometers southeast of Yos rgan nyin (Youganning), the Henan County seat. Khu sin means 'navel' in the local Oirat dialect. According to villagers, the presence of a small navel-shaped hill near Khu sin Township Seat explains the township's name, which was given when the township was established in 1984. Earlier, it had been part of neighboring Mdo gsum Township.

Present-day Khu sin Township includes the traditional Be si che chung territory, which included Greater Be si (Be si che, now called Mo chu) and Lesser Be si (Be si chung, now called Khu sin da de).⁵ According to Dkon mchog skyabs (2009), 'Be si' comes from the Manchu language title 'Beize'/ 'Beile', which was a title given to the Henan Prince during the Qing Dynasty. Consultation with oral and written sources did not explain why these villages were named after this particular title.

⁵ Other communities in Khu sin Township, for example Rgya mkhar and Tshos wan tshos villages, were not traditional parts of Be si che chung.

According to Snying lcags (2011), an alternative name for the village is Ka rwa ro, which was the nickname of a famous local villager, formally known as Ban mig skya stong.⁶ This name is not in use among villagers; they call the village Khu sin be chung or Khu sin da de. We use the name Be si chung in this paper.

Map 2. A topographical map of Henan showing the location of Be si chung Village (circle, bottom right). High altitudes are lighter. Map by Gerald Roche.



Contemporary Be si chung Village consists of three brigades (First Brigade, Second Brigade, and Third Brigade) and has a total of forty households (242 residents, including 130 males and 112 females). We estimate that an average family has around six members. All Be si chung villagers are officially classified as Mongols. Traditionally, the village was organized into *ru skor* 'encampments', each of which had five to eight families that lived near each other for

⁶ This source does not provide further information on this individual. In 2013, Ka rwa ro refers to a lineage in Be si chung, presumably the descendants of the eponymous individual. Local oral sources suggest Ka rwa ro lived about five generations ago.

mutual aid and protection, but tended their own herds.⁷ Each encampment had a *mgo khrid* 'informal leader', who was usually an elder male.

All Be si chung villagers are pastoralists who herd yaks, sheep, and horses. The grassland has been divided on a per-person basis since the township was established in 1984. Each person has approximately ninety *mo'u* (about six hectares) of grassland. Traditionally, the Prince owned all the land, but communities managed territories allotted to them by the Prince. Frequent inter-communal conflicts (documented in Dkon mchog skyabs 2009) suggest that locals had a strong sense of proprietary over their land, though they did not own it.

Be si chung Village is located in a single valley, with the Har shul River running through the center from west to east. The north side of the valley is referred to as the *nyin sa* 'sunny side' whereas the southern side is the *srib sa* 'shady side'. Each family moves four times annually. The precise location of these seasonal pastures changes each year. Winter pastures are typically near the river, at the lowest altitude in the valley while summer pastures are located in the mountains north and south of the valley. Annual pastoral migration consists of movements between these two poles.

At the beginning of March, villagers move from their winter site to the spring pasture in the foothills around the valley. Villagers stay at the spring pasture until May, and then move to the summer pasture, higher in the mountains where they live from June until late August. In late August, herders move to their autumn pastures, located at approximately the same altitude as their spring pastures. Villagers then stay at the autumn pasture until late November, when they return to their winter pasture. Distances and travel time between camps varies for each family.

Families that are considered wealthy currently have 600 to 700 sheep, 130 to 150 yaks, and approximately forty horses, while

⁷ Dkon mchog skyabs (2009) lists The ji, Pa ba, Dge thub, Co yas, Man ju'i 'Jigs rgyam, Ra rdza, and Ba 'bas as the names of the encampments in Be si chung.

those considered poor have ninety to 110 sheep, twenty to forty yaks, and one or two horses. Villagers sell butter, wool, yak hair, cheese, milk, and one or two sheep or yaks a year to earn cash. They also earn cash by collecting and selling caterpillar fungus in spring for half a month. On average, a wealthy family's annual cash income is 15,000 to 20,000 RMB, while a poor family's is 4,000 to 5,000 RMB.

Most Be si chung villagers speak Tibetan and understand and speak a little Oirat (Western Mongol), which they call Sog skad (Birtalan 2003).⁸ We estimate that between forty and fifty people currently speak Oirat fluently in Be si chung, but finding exact numbers is challenging. The youngest fluent speaker is aged eighteen and the oldest is eighty-six. Most fluent speakers are over the age of fifty. All Oirat-speakers typically include Tibetan lexical items in their speech, as shown in the following brief example, in which Tibetan words are in bold:⁹

ཁོ་ཨ་ཁྱེ་དར་ཁྱེ་ཡིན་དུས།

Kho e hwan dar hwan yin dus¹⁰

When he was powerful...

Presently, Oirat has lost its role as a language of daily speech, and is mostly used as an argot among elders.

Be si chung villagers follow the Dge lugs Sect of Tibetan Buddhism and frequently visit Shing bza' Monastery,¹¹ which is fifty-five kilometers from the village, in the township seat. Villagers visit the monastery to worship and circumambulate on special occasions, such as the thirteenth to sixteenth days of the first lunar month, the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the fourth lunar month, and the first

⁸ Sog/ Sog po refers to Mongols and Mongolia, and Sog skad 'Sog language' refers generically to languages spoken by Mongolians.

⁹ The extent to which the use of Tibetan lexical items impeded communication with speakers of other Oirat dialects is unclear.

¹⁰ Here and elsewhere in the article, we render Oirat terms in Tibetan script. Although a script exists for Oirat (see footnote 13) it is not used in Henan.

¹¹ This monastery is also called Stag lung.

day of the sixth lunar month. The village *mgon khang* 'protector deity shrine' is located in the winter pasture. It is also referred to as *sku 'bum* '100,000 images' because the shrine contains numerous Buddha images made from red clay. Villagers circumambulate the *mgon khang* when they are free and are so inclined. Men may go inside to worship, but women may not.

Men go to mountain peaks to burn offerings to the local mountain deity, A myes sras mchog,¹² to beseech protection. Village males also make offerings at the *lab rtse* of Chab 'brag¹³ and Lha chen,¹⁴ to beseech these deities to protect people, pastures, and livestock. Each family has their own *srung ma* 'tutelary deity', who is typically Dpal ldan lha mo.

Every household has their own *mchod khang* 'shrine' in the winter house, which is separate from other rooms, and contains *thang ka* and pictures of *bla ma* and deities. Butter lamps are lit in front of these images every morning. Everyday, men burn *bsang* on the household roof and women burn *tsha gsur* 'a mixture of *rtsam pa*, butter, yogurt and milk' in the family courtyard.

Khu sin Township has a primary school with grades one to six. It was established in 1966 to serve both Khu sin and Mdo gsum townships, which were a single administrative unit at that time. In 1984, this unit was divided, creating Khu sin and Mdo gsum townships. Mdo gsum Township then built its own primary school. According to Bsod nams tshe ring, compulsory Oirat language classes were taught in Khu sin Primary School from 1985 to 1995 by teachers who were Oirat-speakers from Haixi Mongol and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Students learned to speak Oirat and to write Mongol in the classical Mongolian script.¹⁵ There were approximately

¹² This 4,539 meter peak is in the mountains south of Be si chung (Snying lcags 2011). Men may offer *bsang* to this deity on any nearby peak.

¹³ This peak is in the mountains north of Be si chung and is 4,483 meters tall (Snying lcags 2011).

¹⁴ Snying lcags (2011) identifies Sras mochog and Lha chen as the same peak. However, these two peaks are on opposite ends of the valley's southern side. Sras mchog is at the east end and Lha chen is at the west end.

¹⁵ Although Oirat has its own script (see <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/kalmyk.htm>), Qinghai Oirat-speakers are classified by the government as

sixty students in the school at that time. However, during the Henan People's Congress of 1995, many argued that teaching Oirat was impractical in a Tibetan area. They contended that though students learned Oirat well, the language had limited usefulness. Therefore, it was decided that Tibetan would be used as the primary medium of educational instruction, supplemented by Chinese. Nonetheless, local elders sometimes teach spoken Oirat in their homes on weekends, to anyone who are interested.

Most Be si chung elders are illiterate except for a few who, at one time, had been monks or nuns. Some villagers attended illiteracy elimination classes in around 2001, and learned basic written Tibetan.

In 2013, the village had twenty-eight primary school students (twenty boys and eight girls), ten middle school students (four boys and six girls), seven high school students (four boys and three girls), four university students (two boys and two girls), and one postgraduate student (at Southwest Nationalities University, Chengdu City).

Eight locals who are university graduates work in the township or county governments. The youngest of these, Skal bzang don 'grub, who works in Yos rgan nyin, is from Be si chung. A graduate of Inner Mongolia Normal University, he was born in 1986.¹⁶

Mongol, and are taught the classical Mongol script that is used by Khalkha (eastern) Mongols (see Krueger 1975).

¹⁶ While a college student, Skal bzang don 'grub published a book titled *Na ri zhos bu* (Mongolian: *Sun Bird*). In 2005, the Hohhot TV Station broadcast a Mongolian language interview with him.

YURTS IN BE SI CHUNG

The following riddles describe yurts.¹⁷

Riddle 1.

¹ ཨ་ཚགས་ཡང་ཚགས་ཁ་ན།
² ཡང་ཚགས་བྲ་མའི་མགོ་ན།
³ དགྲིལ་འཁོར་མདའ་མདུང་བརྒྱ་ཡོད།
⁴ མདའ་ཡི་མདའ་སྟེང་རེ་ན།
⁵ བྱ་ག་པའི་ཨ་ལུང་བརྒྱ་ཡོད།
⁶ མདའ་ཐོག་དར་གྲིས་གཙ་ཡོད།
⁷ དར་ཐོག་མདུང་པའི་མནན་ཡོད།

- ¹ There is an infinite sieve.
² Atop the sieve,
³ Are hundreds of round arrow shafts.
⁴ Atop each arrow,
⁵ Are hundreds of bent hoops.
⁶ Ice covers the arrows.
⁷ Knots press on the ice.

Riddle 2.

¹ ཉག་ཁ་བརྒྱ་ན་དཔའ་བོ་བརྒྱ།
² དཔའ་བོ་བརྒྱ་ཡིས་ཞྭ་གཅིག་གོན།

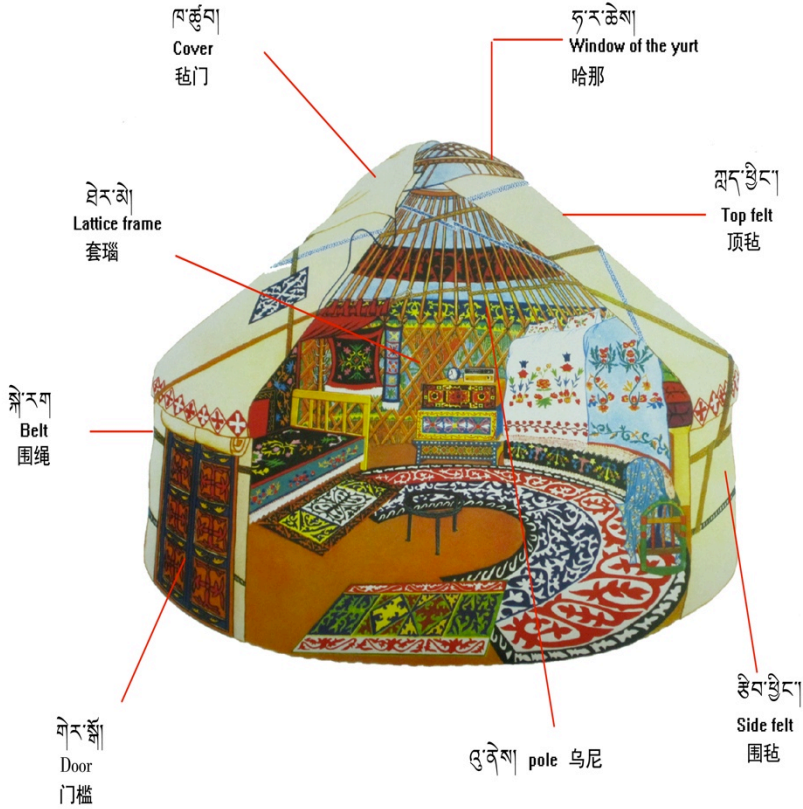
- ¹ There are one hundred heroes on the one hundred indentations.
² The one hundred heroes wear a single hat.

Local Tibetans call tents *sbra* or *gur* whereas Oirat-speakers say *ger*. According to villagers, *ger* has two meanings: 'home', for example, "*Ger du ya bas* 'Go home'," and 'house', for example, "*Ger*

¹⁷ These riddles were told by Tshe ring don 'grub.

du yer, 'Come into the house'." Names for yurt parts are outlined in the diagram below, and include both Oirat and Tibetan terms.

Figure 1. This picture is from an unpublished manuscript by 'Jigs med rdo rje and illustrates the names of different yurt parts.



Ger are considered to be symbols of auspiciousness. For example, Brtson 'grus contends that yurts embody the Eight Auspicious Symbols: the *ha ra ches* (skylight, below) symbolizes the dharma wheel.

Figure 2. The *ha ra ches*.



The *as di* 'gate/ door' symbolizes the two golden fish, the *ther shing* 'lattice panels' symbolize the eternal knot, the *klad phyng* 'top felt' symbolizes the victory banner, the round shape of the *ger* symbolizes the treasure vase, felt-covered lattice panels symbolize the precious parasol; the white color of the yurt symbolizes the white conch, and the yurt pitched on the earth symbolizes the lotus flower. Consequently, locals often refer to *ger* as *bkra shis rtags brgyad kyi gnas khyim* 'the home with the Eight Auspicious Symbols'.

Other features also make the *ger* a dwelling that is considered an auspicious place to live, for example, two tiger fangs at the back of the yurt prevent harm coming from behind the yurt.

Two tiger eyebrows on the front of the yurt are considered to prevent harm and disaster coming from the front of the yurt. Above the door the shape of a *tung tse* 'shoe-shaped ingot' is also believed to bring wealth.

Figure 3. The two 'tiger fangs' at the back of the yurt (see arrows, below) are thought to prevent harm from behind the yurt.



Figure 4. The two tiger eyebrows (see arrows, below) are thought to prevent harm and disaster coming from the front. Above the door, the diamond-shaped ingot symbolizes the family's wealth.



Sunlight shining through the skylight is used to tell the time. When sunlight reaches the top of the lattice frame, it is time to send the livestock to pasture. When light reaches the stove, it is midday, and therefore time to water the livestock. When sunshine leaves the yurt, it is time to drive livestock back home. A saying about this time-telling method goes:

གེར་ནང་ནི་ཐིག་ཕུག་རྩི་འོ་ཚད་ཡིན།
ger nang nyi thig phyug rdzi'i dus tshod yin
sunshine inside the yurt is the herdsmen's clock

Figure 5. The 'herdsmen's clock' – sunlight through the skylight.



A yurt's interior is arranged according to its inner (furthest from the door) and outer (closest to the door) sections, as well as its left and right side. Left and right are determined from the perspective of the innermost section of the yurt, facing towards the door – the opposite is the case for Tibetan tents.

Males place wooden boxes storing the family's valuables in the upper center of the yurt. Among them is an altar on top of a wooden box. On the right side, boys and men stack *sgyo* 'leather sacks' full of grain. Robes for men and boys are then stacked on these sacks.

Saddles are placed by the *sgyo*, near the door. Robes for girls and women are stacked on the saddles.

On the left side, women place a *thag* 'wooden cupboard' that has several shelves with bowls and cups. Next to the *thag* is a *zangs cha* 'cabinet' where copper pots, water buckets, and milk buckets are stored. The *thab ka* 'stove' is traditionally made of three clods of earth, and is in the center of the yurt. The family head sits between the *thab ka* and the shrine. Other males sit to the family head's right and females sit to his left, in descending order of age.

Yurt Types

Locals traditionally recognized three types of yurt: *mgon ger* 'shrine yurts', *dpon ger* 'leaders' yurts', and '*bangs ger* 'commoners' yurts'.

Mgon ger were used as communal shrine rooms. *Mgon* refers to the tutelary deity Mgon po 'Mahakala'. According to elders, the Be si chung *mgon ger* contained scripture books and a large statue of Mgon po. Elaborate food offerings were presented to Mgon po there on special days, such as during the New Year period. Women did not enter the *mgon ger*, but circumambulated it.

Dpon ger were larger than common yurts, and belonged to local leaders, including tribal leaders and the Henan Prince. Felt for such yurts was made from the best wool. Yak hair was used to adorn leaders' yurts with images from among the Eight Auspicious Symbols. The largest *dpon ger* belonged to the Prince. It was made with 120 *ther mgo*,¹⁸ which literally means 'pole head', which refers to the point where two poles crossed at the top of a lattice panel. A typical lattice panel consisted of ten *ther mgo* consequently, the Prince's yurt had twelve lattice panels.

According to Brtson 'grus, in addition to a large diameter, the Prince's yurt was also so tall that when it was pitched, someone stood on horseback to raise the skylight. The Prince's yurt was destroyed in

¹⁸ Gangs ljongs tshan rtсал rig gnas 'phel rgyas gling (2009) states that there were eighty *ther mgo*.

1958. However, the *dpon ger* of the Thor god tribal leader¹⁹ features 100 *ther mgo* and is now the largest yurt in Henan. It is kept by Phyag rdor²⁰ in his home, but can no longer be pitched because the skylight is broken.

Commoners' yurts were called '*bangs ger* and could not have more than sixty *ther mgo*. Infringement of this rule was punished by imprisonment in the Henan Prince's jail.

New Year Festivities in the Henan Prince's Yurt

A unique Henan festivity took place in the Henan Prince's yurt, which was traditionally pitched anew at New Year, as were all yurts. This rite required the assistance of special aides – the *me rin* and *sgo gcod*. *Sgo gcod* means 'door blocker', while *me rin* has no identifiable meaning. Those two people were always from Be si che chung, were chosen by the Prince, and served in this capacity until they died. Here, we focus on the *me rin* of the tenth Henan Prince, Bkra shis tshe ring, called Bstan 'dzin bkra shis, from Be si chung Village. According to Bso go, there were three *me rin* after Bstan 'dzin bkra shis until 1958: Sangs rgyas, Mgu grags, and Skal bzang rab rgyas. When Bstan 'dzin bkra shis was the *me rin*, the *sgo gcod* was Lo don.²¹ On the last day of the twelfth lunar month each year, the *me rin* and *sgo gcod* went to Urge,²² where the Henan Prince lived, and helped prepare for Lo sar.

The *me rin*, *sgo gcod*, and the Prince's ministers²³ arranged the seating according to social rank,²⁴ made food decorations, put out

¹⁹ Thor god corresponds to present-day Mdo gsum Township.

²⁰ The name of a male descendant of the Thor god tribal leader.

²¹ Lo don was a locally famous singer from Khu sin Township who died in about 2001 at, we were told, the age of 103.

²² This Mongolian term means 'palace' or 'royal residence'.

²³ According to Ga rdo, the Prince had 200 *blon po* 'ministers', who were also his soldiers. They stayed with the Prince only on such special days as New Year.

meat, bread, mare-milk liquor, and so on, in basins and plates, and then put these on tables. Gangs ljongs tshan rtsal rig gnas 'phel rgyas gling (2009:119), describes the prepared yurt as follows:

Three connected hearths were constructed in the yurt. Eighty pairs of storage sacks were on the right-hand side. Forty chests were in the center. Two types of cabinets were on the left. The shrine was at the head of the rows of seating. The king's²⁴ three thrones were in front of that. In front of the thrones were [the king's] gold, silver, and ivory seals and also the imperial decrees awarded to each successive Prince.

Next, everybody left the yurt while the *sgo gcod* stayed inside; the *me rin* stayed nearby, but not in the yurt. The *sgo gcod* could not leave until the next morning. Soon after sunrise on the first day of the New Year, the *me rin*, Prince, and all his family and ministers went to the yurt.

The door was locked from inside, and nobody, including the Prince, could enter. When the *me rin* knocked on the door with his *phu ring* 'long sleeves' three times, the *sgo gcod* said in Oirat:

ཆེ་ཁོན་པས།
che khen pas
Who are you?

The *me rin* responded:

པས་མེ་རིན་བཀྲ་ཤིས། དེན་ཆིན་མང་པོ་ནི་ཐོ་ཞི་མེ་ལི་པེ་ནི། འེ་དུ་ཐེ་ལི།

pas me rin Bkra shis/ den Chin wang tho ne tho zhi me li pe
ni/ 'e du the li

²⁴ For example, the Prince's throne was placed in the middle of the yurt. The queen's seat was to the left of the Prince's throne. Ministers sat on both sides.

²⁵ The terms *rgyal po* 'king' and *chin wang* 'prince' are used interchangeably in this text.

I am *me rin* Bkra shis, and the Prince and his people are here too. Please open the door.

The *sgo gcod* replied loudly:

པས་སྒོ་གཙོང་ལྷང་ལེ་དུ་འོ།
pas sgo gcod wang 'e du 'ol

This is the *sgo gcod*, please come in.

The *sgo gcod* then unlocked the door, opened it, and welcomed everyone in. Everyone went inside and sat at their seats. The *me rin* brought a whole boiled sheep covered with a blue *kha btags*, and divided it among the guests. He had finished his duty and could sit.

The *sgo gcod* then held a bowl of mare's-milk liquor and sang three auspicious songs in Oirat. The Oirat lyrics have been forgotten, but their meaning has been recorded in Tibetan.

Song 1.²⁶

¹ དགུང་ཨ་སྒོན་ཡན་ལ་མཐོ་ནི་མེད།
² གན་ཡན་ཞིག་མཐོ་བའི་སྒོན་ལམ་འདེབས།
³ ས་བསང་དཀར་ཡན་ལ་རྒྱས་ནི་མེད།
⁴ གན་ཡན་ཞིག་རྒྱས་པའི་སྒོན་ལམ་འདེབས།
⁵ རྒྱ་གཙང་བོ་ཡན་ལ་བྱུག་ནི་མེད།
⁶ གན་ཡན་ཞིག་བྱུག་གི་སྒོན་ལམ་འདེབས།

¹ There is nothing higher than the sky.

² Pray to be higher than it!

³ There is nothing more prosperous than the earth.

⁴ Pray to be more prosperous than it!

²⁶ The following songs were provided by Grags pa rgya mtsho.

⁵ There is nothing more abundant than the river.

⁶ Pray to be more abundant than it!

Song 2.

¹ སེར་པོ་གསེར་གྱི་ཁྱི་ཐོག་ན།
² མགོ་གསེར་ལྷ་ཅན་གྱི་བླ་མ་སྟིང།
³ དཀར་པོ་དངུལ་གྱི་གདན་ཐོག་ན།
⁴ ཐོབ་གོ་ས་ཅན་གྱི་དཔོན་པོ་སྟིང།
⁵ གོམ་ལག་ཅན་གྱི་རྟ་ཐོག་ན།
⁶ ལྷམ་ཐུར་ཅན་གྱི་བུ་ཚ་སྟིང།

¹ On the golden yellow throne,

² The golden-hatted lama is happy!

³ On the silvery white mat,

⁴ The high-ranking leader is happy!

⁵ On the stylish well-paced horse,

⁶ The nimble-minded child is happy!

Song 3.

¹ སྟོད་གྱི་རི་པོ་སྤྲུག་པ་ཅན།
² རི་སྤྲུག་པ་ཅན་ལ་རི་དྲགས་འཁོར།
³ བར་གྱི་མཚོ་མོ་བླངས་པ་ཅན།
⁴ མཚོ་བླངས་པ་ཅན་ལ་ཉ་སྤམ་འཁོར།
⁵ སྟོད་གྱི་དཔོན་པོ་བྱང་སེམས་ཅན།
⁶ དཔོན་བྱང་སེམས་ཅན་ལ་ལྷ་སྟེ་འཁོར།

¹ On the upper foggy mountain,

² Live wild animals.

³ In the middle vaporous lake,

⁴ Live fish and otters.

⁵ Under the lower benevolent leader,

⁶ Live his lovely subjects.

While singing, he danced around the interior of the yurt three times. None of those we consulted could describe this dance. When he finished this, the *sgo gcod*'s task was done and he could also sit. The Prince then said in Oirat:

པོ་གོ་དེ་གར་རན་ནེ་རི་ལ།

po go di ger ran ne ri li ya

The party begins. Everyone, enjoy!

Guests then drank, sang, danced, and played games. After some time, the *me rin* and *sgo gcod* returned home. They had no special position or role in community daily life, however, they were admired by villagers, because it was considered a privilege to be the *me rin* or *sgo gcod* and join the Prince's grand annual celebration.

Making and Pitching Yurts

We now describe the making of a yurt with eighty *ther mgo*.

Tools needed to make a yurt are: a '*ur cur ha* (used to straighten poles, see below), a '*bug* 'drill', *phying bu* 'felt', '*u nes* 'roof poles', a *sog le* 'saw'. Each is shown in the following photographs.

Villagers collect willow to make poles in early spring, before birds begin singing. From the twelfth to the second lunar months is generally the best time to collect willow, as expressed in the saying:²⁷

དཔྱིད་ཚྭ་སྤྱོད་ཀྱི་ཤིང་།

dpyid tshigs bya shing

...which indicates that before birds sing, willow is strong, but afterwards, in spring, the willow becomes soft and supple, and is thus unsuited for making poles.

²⁷ Due to their abbreviated form, we have left this and the following saying untranslated. Instead, we provide brief interpretations.

Figure 6. Yurt-making tools. The piece of wood at the top is the *gcur shing*. It is part of the '*u cur ha*' and is used to straighten the yurt poles. The knife and stick below it on the right are also part of the '*ur cur ha*'. A saw is to the left. Other tools are drills.



Willow is collected in The bo Forest (in The bo Township, Mdzod dge County, Si khron [Sichuan] Province), because the best willow grows there. Only men collect willow. In the past, four to five yaks were taken to transport willow branches. Before 1985, collectors paid twenty kilograms of *zhag*²⁸ for 200 willow branches, but then began paying forty RMB. It currently costs 1,000 RMB for 200 poles. Each willow pole is about 2.5 meters long, and is transported in bundles of fifty.

The poles are stored in a dark place for one year, as reflected in the saying:

ཐེར་ཤིང་གཉེར་ས་མི་ནག
ther shing gnyer sa mi nag

...which implies that poles stored in a dark place become more durable. After one year, the poles are soaked in an artificial pool of water for forty-eight hours.

²⁸ *Zhag* is grease from meat that coagulates on top of the water meat is boiled in.

Figure 7. The willow branches are soaked in water to make them supple.



Sheep dung is then smoldered. The wet willow branches are put in the smoldering dung for fifteen minutes.

Figure 8. The wet willow branches are put in smoldering sheep dung.



After being removed from the fire, each willow pole is put in the mouth of the *'ur cur ha* to straighten it. One eighty-*ther mgo* yurt needed 256 poles.

Figure 9. The *'u cur ha* is used to straighten yurt poles.



Figure 10. A bent willow pole is straightened in the mouth of the *'u cur ha*.



Figure 11. Whittling a pole.



Next, poles are whittled to an even size, and red earth is used to color 255 of them. One is left white, and is considered a symbol of men. This white pole is used on the male side of the yurt. After being painted, the poles are dried in the sun. The dried poles are then measured to determine where to make the holes for the lattice joints and are sawn to an even length.

Figure 12. Measuring the poles to determine where holes will be drilled.



Figure 13. Sawing the poles to standard size.



A drill is used to make the holes where the poles will be joined to form a lattice. A *rgyun bu* 'leather cord' is threaded through the holes to create a sturdy *ther shing* 'lattice panel'.

Figure 14. This '*bug*' drill is used to drill holes in the poles.



Figure 15. Two men operate the drill that makes holes in the poles.



Ger phying 'yurt felt' is made from sheep wool. Sheep are sheared from the fifteenth day of the fifth lunar month until the fifteenth day of the sixth lunar month. Neighbors gather and help each other shear. Men use shears to cut the wool. Women divide the wool into good and bad quality according to color. Whiter wool is considered higher quality. After that, wool is bundled for ease of transport.

Villagers then make felt. One piece of felt typically requires twenty kilograms of wool. The size is determined according to the size of the lattice panel. Firstly, villagers choose a flat place near a river, put a *ma phying*²⁹ on the grass, and then put wool on the *ma phying*. A clump of wool is placed in the middle, spread out to form a thin layer, and then the process is repeated. Next, the layered wool is rolled in the *ma phying* from bottom to top (using the forearms), and then from side to side, using a rope.

Six people kneel on the grass in two lines around the felt and roll the tied felt. While rolling, they count in Oirat, as follows:

²⁹ *Ma phying* refers to an old piece of felt used to make new felt. A family borrowed a *ma phying* if they lacked one.

| | | |
|---------|----------------|-----|
| ནི་གེ | <i>ni ge</i> | 1 |
| ཧོ་ཡོར | <i>ho yor</i> | 2 |
| ཡུ་རིབ | <i>wu rib</i> | 3 |
| ཏེ་རིབ | <i>te rib</i> | 4 |
| ཐ་བུ | <i>tha bu</i> | 5 |
| ཅི་ར་ལྷ | <i>tsir wa</i> | 6 |
| ཏོ་ལོ | <i>to lo</i> | 7 |
| ནེ་མི | <i>ne mi</i> | 8 |
| ཡེ་སུ | <i>ye su</i> | 9 |
| འ་རེས | <i>'a res</i> | 10 |
| ཧོ་རི | <i>ho ri</i> | 20 |
| ལོ་ཅི | <i>wo chi</i> | 30 |
| ཏེ་ཅུ | <i>te chu</i> | 40 |
| ཐ་བུ | <i>tha bu</i> | 50 |
| ཅི་རི | <i>ci ri</i> | 60 |
| ཏ་ལི | <i>ta li</i> | 70 |
| ན་ཡི | <i>na yi</i> | 80 |
| ཡེ་རི | <i>ye ri</i> | 90 |
| ཙོ་སོ | <i>tsos</i> | 100 |

Each person counts four numbers in rotation until the number 1,000. The first person counts one to four, the second person counts from five to eight, and so on. After they roll the felt 1,000 times, it is firm and can be untied. The felt is then spread out, and left in the sunshine for fifteen to twenty minutes. The new felt is then rolled without the *ma phyig*, counting as before. This time, they roll it while counting to ten thousand, which takes approximately five hours.

Thirdly, after they finish rolling the felt ten thousand times, it is untied, put in a river for approximately fifteen minutes to clean, removed from the river, and spread out on grass in the sun until it is completely dry.

There are several types of felt for yurts including *klad phyng* 'top felt' (for the roof), *rtsib phyng* 'side felt' (to cover the walls), and *kha tshub* 'skylight cover'. However, regardless of the type or size, the process of making felt is the same. Felt is always white.

Having prepared all these materials, the yurt can then be pitched. The site where a family pitches their yurt is decided by lottery in Be si chung. Before moving pasture, the village leader summons each household head to join the lottery. He writes place names on pieces of paper, rolls each paper into a ball to ensure the text is not visible, and then each family head chooses one. Afterwards, each family uses several big stones to mark out the location for their yurt at their allotted site. There is no certain good or bad place for pitching a yurt, so long as it is within the village territory. Generally, however, people prefer a place near a river, which makes it convenient to fetch water. After pitching, a channel is dug around the yurt to prevent water from flowing into the tent. Since yurts generally face downhill, the channel directs the water from behind the tent, around the sides to the front of the tent, where two channels by the door funnel the water away from either side.

Yurts typically face south but, when a new yurt is pitched for the first time, it must face east, though locals are unable to explain why. After one week, or at most twenty days, the new yurt is rotated to face south.

Two to three people are required to pitch a yurt. One person first erects one section of lattice frame on what will be the right side. Then the other person ties together the joints of the eight lattice frames one by one.

Figure 16. The man on the left uses a leather cord to tie the lattice pane. The person on the right puts a lattice panel in place.



Figure 17. Setting up the lattice panels. The man (left) ties two panels, and the woman (right) will join the panels.



Lattice panels are set up in a clockwise direction, starting from the door, on the male side of the yurt.

Figure 18. The door is joined to the last lattice panel, completing the frame.



The skylight is typically made of *gsom shing* 'pinewood', and is purchased from Han carpenters in the county town. No locals in living memory have constructed skylights. The skylight is purchased without holes for the roof poles, which are dug out with a knife. Traditionally, the pinewood was wrapped with leather to protect it, but now it may also be protected with rubber (see images).

The yurt roof is pitched next. '*U nes* 'roof poles' are used to join the skylight and the lattice panels. Two roof poles are used to raise the skylight in the middle of the interior of the yurt. Roof poles are then inserted into the skylight holes by those outside the yurt. After inserting around forty roof poles, the skylight is stable.

Figure 19. Preparing to raise the skylight in the center of the yurt frame.



Figure 20. Raising the skylight.



Figure 21. Binding the lattice panels together.



Figure 22. The roof poles are tied to the lattice panels with the left hand.



Figure 23. The yurt roof poles are inserted into the skylight in no set order.



Figure 24. The pitched yurt frame.



After inserting eighty roof poles, the side felt and then the top felt are put over the frame. The side felt is bound with *ske rags* 'belts' made of yak hair. Finally, the *kha tshub* is put over the skylight.

Figure 25. Tying a rope to secure the side felt. Side felt is generally called *rtsib phying*, but the three pieces of felt required to complete the walls are divided into two types. Two pieces immediately adjacent to the door on either side are *rtsib phying*. A third piece at the back is *phugs phying*. Six ropes tie the three pieces of *rtsib phying* into place.



Figure 26. Placing the top felt. The top felt for this yurt consisted of two pieces. Each piece is slightly larger than half the roof, so the two overlapping pieces ensure the roof is water-tight. The first piece (below) is placed on the front of the roof, and is secured with two ropes. The second, upper piece is secured with three ropes.



Figure 27. A 'belt' is tied clockwise around the yurt.



CONCLUSION: YURTS IN PRESENT-DAY BE SI CHUNG AND HENAN
COUNTY

Bso go stated that all families in Be si chung lived year-round in felt yurts during her childhood in the early twentieth century. In approximately 1930, her father went to the market at Bla brang Monastery and purchased a cloth tent – the first in the village. From then on, her family lived in the cloth tent from spring to autumn, and in a felt yurt in winter. Cloth tents were easier to transport and pitch. Increasingly, villagers bought cloth tents from Bla brang. Living in felt yurts year-round became less common. Despite the upheavals of the ensuing decades, locals continued to live in cloth tents and felt yurts.

In 1984, when the government subdivided the collectively owned land, adobe houses began to be built in winter pastures. People dwelt in such houses during winter, while cloth tents or felt yurts were lived in during other seasons.

In 1988, Tshe ring don 'grub purchased Be si chung's first cloth yurt from a store in Henan County Town. The design was impressive – such yurts combined traditional aesthetics with ease of transport and pitching. A traditional wood and felt yurt took two hours to pitch while a cloth yurt typically required less than an hour. Although cloth yurts were more expensive than felt ones, they were purchased and used after Tshe ring don 'grub bought the first one.

Starting in around 1992, villagers began voluntarily relocating to Khu sin Township Town, where they lived in brick houses. Elders, especially, moved to care for their grandchildren while they attended school and their parents remained in the pasture. Use of yurts began to dramatically decline at this time.

In 2008, the government began building houses in the county town and offered them for free to any locals who wished to relocate there. Subsequently, many people moved from Be si chung Village to the county town. Typically, families sent children and elders to the county town, while adults stayed in the pasture to tend livestock. Housing projects were established for each township.

Figure 28. A modern cloth yurt. Photograph by 'Jigs med rdo rje.



Resettlement has fractured community structure. Housing is allocated based on township rather than village and, though separate housing projects have been established for Mdo gsum and Khu sin, residents of both townships currently live in both housing projects.

In 2011, the government increased the terms of resettlement by offering cash inducements to anyone who resettled in the county town housing projects. The cash offered was based on the amount of land a household had. As before, households typically responded by sending elders and children to the county town while continuing to herd in the village pastures.

Between 1992 and 2011, felt yurts disappeared from Be si chung. Simultaneously, the construction of 'Mongolesque'³⁰ buildings in Henan began, some of which resemble yurts. For example, the Henan Hotel, built in 2002, was the first 'yurt building' in Henan.

³⁰ The term 'Mongolesque' is employed in a way similar to 'Arabesque', which designates features in both music and architecture that were intended to evoke, rather than represent, Arabic, and more broadly Oriental culture.

Figure 29. The Henan Hotel, built in 2002, was scheduled for demolition when this picture was taken in 2013.³¹



In 2009, the stage for the triennial Nadam Festival was built in the shape of a half-yurt. Family homes, many of them in the resettlement projects, now have yurt-inspired features, such as domed roofs and curved bay windows. Most 'yurt houses' are white and blue, which locals consider symbolically Mongol colors. At the same time, miniature felt yurts have become popular throughout Henan. Women use them as jewelry boxes, and they are also filled with candy and displayed as decorations put up during the Tibetan New Year. Young women from Henan, in particular, are proud to dangle miniature felt yurts from their key-rings, purses, and mobile phones. While working on this article in July 2013, Henan residents were preparing to welcome Bla ma 'Jam dbyang zhad pa from Bla brang Monastery, who was scheduled to visit all the county's townships and monasteries. One of the most important gifts to be presented to him was a felt yurt, prepared in the traditional manner, by the people of Mdo gsum Township, indicating the continuing significance of yurts to the people of Henan.

³¹ For more images of Mongolesque features in Henan's architecture, see <http://www.flickr.com/photos/geraldroche/sets/72157635270168148/>.

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³² International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies.

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NON-ENGLISH TERMS

'bangs ger འབངས་གོར།

'bug འབུག།

'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa འཇམ་དབྱངས་བཞད་པ།

'Jigs med rdo rje འཇིགས་མེད་རྡོ་རྗེ།

'u cur ha ལུ་ཅུར་ཧ།

'u nes ལུ་ནེས།

A

A mdo ཨ་མདོ།

A myes lha chen ཨ་མྱེས་ལྷ་ཆེན།

A myes sras mchog ཨ་མྱེས་སྲས་མཆོག།

as di ཨས་དི།

B

Ba 'bas བ་འབས།

Ban mig skya stong བན་མིག་སྐྱ་སྟོང་།

Be si che བེ་སི་ཆེ།

Be si che chung བེ་སི་ཆེ་ཆུང་།

Be si chung བེ་སི་ཆུང་།

bkra shis rtags brgyad kyi gnas khyim བརྒྱ་ཤིས་རྟགས་བརྒྱད་ཀྱི་གན་ཁྱིམ།

Bla brang བླ་བྲང་།

Brtson 'grus བརྟལ་རྩ་འབྲུས།

Bsam grub བསམ་གྲུབ།

bsang བསང་།

Bso go བསོ་གོ།

Bsod nams tshe ring བསོད་ནམས་ཆེ་རིང་།

Bstan 'dzin bkra shis བསྟན་འཛིན་བརྒྱ་ཤིས།

C

Chin wang ཆིན་ལང་།

Co yas ཙོ་ཡས་།

D

Dge lugs དགེ་ལུགས་པ།

Dge thub དགེ་ཐུབ།

Dkon mchog skyabs དཀོན་མཆོག་སྐྱབས།

dpon ger དཔོན་གེར།

G

Ga rdo ག་རོ།

ger གེར།

ger phying གེར་ཕྱིང་།

ger shing གེར་ཤིང་།

Grags pa rgya mtsho གྲགས་པ་རྒྱ་མཚོ།

gsom shing གསོམ་ཤིང་།

gur གུར།

H

Har shul ཧར་ཤུ། River

ha ra ches ཧར་ཆེས།

Haixi 海西 Mongol and Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture

Henan 河南 Mongol Autonomous County

Hohhot (Huhehaote 呼和浩特)

Huangnan 黄南 Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture

K

Ka rwa ro ཀ་རུ་རོ།

kha tshub ཁ་ཚུབ།

Khu sin ཁུ་སིན། Township

klad phying ཀླད་ཕྱིང་།

L

La kha ལ་ཁ། Monastery
lab rtse ལ་ར་རྩེ།
Lha mo sgrol ma ལྷ་མོ་སྒྲོལ་མ།
Lo don ལོ་དོན།

M

Ma ju'i 'jigs rgyan མ་རྒུའི་འཇིགས་རྒྱན།
ma phying མ་ཕྱིང་།
mchod khang མཚོད་ཁང་།
Mdo gsum མདོ་གསུམ།
Mdzod dge མཛོད་དགེ།
me rin མེ་རིན།
mgo khrid མགོ་ཁྲིད།
mgon ger མགོན་གེར།
mgon khang མགོན་ཁང་།
Mgon po མགོན་པོ།
Mgu grags མགུ་གྲགས།
Mo chu མོ་ཚུ།
mo'u མོ་འུ།
Mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྔོན། Province

N

Na ri zhos bu ན་རི་ཞོས་བུ།
nyin sa ཉིན་ས།

P

Pa ba པ་བ།
phu ring ཕུ་རིང་།
Phyag rdor ཕྱག་རྡོར།
phying bu ཕྱིང་བུ།
phyugs phying ཕུགས་ཕྱིང་།

Q

Qinghai 青海 Province

R

Ra rdza ར་རྩ།
 Rdo rje skyid རོ་རྗེ་སྐྱིད།
 Rgya mkhar རྒྱ་མཁར།
 rgyun bu རྒྱུན་བུ།
 Rma lho ར་ལྷོ།
 rtsam pa རུས་པ།
 ru skor རུ་སྐོར།

S

Sangs rgyas སངས་རྒྱས།
 sbra སྐྱ།
 sgo gcod སྐོ་གཙོང།
 sgyo སྐྱོ།
 Shing bza' ཤིང་བཟལ།
 Sichuan 四川 Province
 Si khron སི་ཁྲོན།
 Skal bzang don 'grub སྐལ་བཟང་དོན་འགྲུབ།
 Skal bzang rab rgyas སྐལ་བཟང་རབ་རྒྱས།
 ske rags སྐེ་རགས།
 sku 'bum སྐུ་འབུམ།
 Snying lcags སྟིང་ལུགས།
 sog le སོག་ལེ།
 Sog po སོག་པོ།
 Sog skad སོག་སྐད།
 srib sa སྐབ་ས།
 Stag lung སྟག་ལུང་།

T

thag ཐག
 thab ka ཐབ་ཀ
 thang ka ཐང་ཀ
 The bo ཐེ་བོ།
 The ji ཐེ་ཇི།
 ther kha ཐེར་ཀམ།
 ther me ཐེར་མེ།
 ther mgo ཐེར་མགོ།
 ther shing ཐེར་ཤིང་།
 Thor god dpon po ཐོར་གོང་དཔོན་པོ།
 tsha gsur ཐ་གསུར།
 Tshe dbang bstan 'dzin ཐེ་དབང་བསྟན་འཛིན།
 Tshe ring don 'grub ཐེ་རིང་དོན་འགྲུབ།
 Tshos wan sos ཐོས་མན་སོས།
 tung tse ཐུང་ཙེ།

U

Urge ཡུརྟེ།

Y

Yos rgan nyin ཡོས་རྟག་ཉིན།
 Youganning ཡུ་ག་ནིང་།

Z

zangs cha ཟངས་ཇ།
 zhag ཟག
 Zi ling ཟི་ལིང་།